Approved for Release: 2018/10/01 C05776284
3.5(c)

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE E
WASHINGTON POST
11 November 1983

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Coup, Terrorism Seen as Possible In Argentina

Intelligence sources raise two equally alarming possibilities in the wake of the election of moderate Radical Party leader Raul Alfonsin as president of Argentina: a military coup to prevent his scheduled December inauguration or renewed leftist terrorism if he makes it into office.

I sent my associate Dale Van Atta to Buenos Aires to look behind the scenes of Argentina's first election in 10 years. He spoke to Argentine and American sources and found that they shared the same concerns over the country's future.

Heading the secret agenda of a recent meeting of the U.S. Embassy's "Intelligence Group"—senior Central Intelligence Agency, Defense Intelligence Agency and Foreign Service officers—was this ominous item: "Possibility of military intervention prior to inauguration."

The sources would not estimate the likelihood of a military coup but they agreed that Alfonsin's landslide victory over Peronist candidate Italo Luder was probably the best deterrent to the generals and admirals. His clear popular mandate is in sharp contrast to the public's contempt for the top military brass, which capped years of misrule with a humiliating defeat in the Falklands war.

The chief cause of apprehension is Alfonsin's emphatic pledge to bring the top brass to book for the disappearance of perhaps 20,000 Argentines during the anti-leftist "dirty war" of the 1970s. If he persists in this determination, the military may move in to save their skins. The armed services still are controlled by men with plenty to hide. It seems improbable that they'll hold still for open public disgrace.

That's why many military leaders quietly backed the Peronist candidate. Luder indicated he might be willing to make a deal with the generals, in the tradition of Peronist-military back-scratching that has endured through four decades of see-saw power.

Alfonsin dropped no such comforting hints. But he undoubtedly will have to compromise, probably by prosecuting enough of the responsible military leaders to set an example, but not so many that the entire officer corps feels threatened.

The second item on the Intelligence Group's agenda was "Terrorism potential after inauguration." In the worst of the "dirty war," leftist terrorists murdered 800 Argentine officials and family members.

The biggest terrorist group was the Montoneros. They were originally Peronist-backed and, in fact, dozens of them marched in hoods at a pre-election party rally. Though some in the crowd gave them the Argentine equivalent of a Bronx cheer, the Montoneros still have Peronist supporters who may turn to terrorism to avenge the party's election defeat.

The election and its immediate aftermath were surprisingly nonviolent, considering the bitterness manifest in the campaign. Peronist posters depicted Alfonsin as the "Coca-Cola candidate"—a puppet of President Reagan, multinational corporations and Jews. The Star of David over his head was a clear appeal for the anti-Semitic vote.

The wealthy aristocrats backed Alfonsin, whose left-of-center views suited them better than the radical populist rhetoric of his opponent. In conversations with my associate at an exclusive club, several members of the upper crust referred to the Peronist party as "a zoo," and its supporters as "animals let out of their cages."

Interestingly, according to intelligence sources, both presidential candidates received modest covert campaign contributions from the CIA, which was hedging its bets on the outcome.

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